

Cooking with woodstoves

By Jennifer Stein

As I stood by the stove stirring my big pot of potato soup today, I meditated on the usefulness of the appliance it was sitting on. Here in the backwoods, our wood cookstove cooks and bakes our meals, heats our water, and keeps our house toasty warm in all kinds of weather. We hang our coats up on the wall close to the stove so they'll be dry in the morning, and I keep an old stoneware pot full of herb tea on a trivet on the side away from the firebox. Work gloves hang over the edge of the woodbox to keep warm, and when I make pancakes, the syrup pitchers go on the warming shelf before I even start mixing up the batter.

Our wood cookstove is a modern airtight stove. Back in grandma's day, a wood cookstove was the center of the kitchen because she was cooking all day to feed her family, but that cookstove required a lot of attention and coaxing. Grandma was constantly feeding it pieces of fuel that had to be chopped small enough to keep a good roaring fire going in the tiny firebox. If she wanted to control the temperature of the oven, she had to carefully gauge the proportion of green wood to dry, and then know exactly when to add more wood, and how much, because the wood in the firebox would burn out before the bread or cake in the oven was baked. And there was no way you could heat the house with it because the heat all went up the chimney and the fire was out at night almost before you had the bed warmed up!

You can still buy an antique or a reproduction of grandma's old stove, if you want to, but if you're going to live with a wood cookstove, you'll probably want to keep the care and feeding of it to a minimum. There are several wood cookstoves on the mar-



ket which are, or claim to be, airtight. I will describe and compare only the two brands

The Stanley

My first wood cookstove was a Waterford Stanley. When I went to buy it I asked the salesperson, who sold both Elmiras and Stanleys, which one he would buy if he had to live with it day in, day out. The Elmira was prettier and more costly, but he recommended the plain-jane Stanley for efficiency and durability. I cooked meals for up to fifteen people at my ski lodge, on that Stanley, and I was never unhappy with it in the eleven years I lived there. I found that with a little practice it was very simple to control the oven temperature for baking, and if I didn't sleep in too late in the morning, the fire which I'd carefully fed my highest quality wood the night before would still be glowing in the firebox. The stove that looked so plain next to the shiny Elmira took on a patina of its own from use, and it

looked just right next to my simple New England antiques.

The Pioneer Maid

Then I sold the ski lodge and moved here to Oregon, to my friend Lance's place. He already had his own wood cookstove, a Pioneer Maid he'd ordered by mail and had shipped to him from Ohio. It is a black box of a stove that sits massively in the middle of the house. Instead of a spin-draft in the ash-door and a fire built on grates, it has down-draft controllers on the side of the firebrick-lined box. Through the airtight lid on the stovetop, you can feed the fire with eight- or ten-inch diameter unsplit log lengths. The bed of coals and ash in the bottom of the box will glow all through the longest night and still be ready to flare up when you feed the fire after a lazy morning. The broad stovetop has room enough for a variety of temperatures which let you perform a wide range of cooking chores (such as fry, boil, simmer, and warm) at the same time. And the large oven has room for six loaves of bread in a baking!

The Pioneer Maid isn't perfect. The oven temperature isn't as easy to regulate as the Stanley. The flues are a little more difficult to clean, and they need cleaning more often. But its design is far superior, and it doesn't depend on a maintenance to retain its airtight quality. It holds a fire longer than any other space heating or cookstove I have ever seen, and it uses far less wood for the heat it puts out.

How to kindle a fire

With any wood cookstove, the first thing you want to do is start the fire. Look at your stove or a diagram of it. Figure out where the drafts and dampers are. One damper controls whether the heated air goes around the oven, or directly up the chimney from the firebox. You always want the air to go up the mainline to the chimney until you have your fire kindled and the wood burning hot and cleanly. Another damper may control the speed or amount of air going around

the oven. Leave this open too! Finally, open your air-intake draft all the way. Just for kindling, you can leave your ashpan door or other air supply ajar. Your chimney should be able to handle all this air supply. If the chimney smokes, it's time to clean the chimney. If the stove smokes, clean the flues.

Light the fire, using several pieces of kindling and a chunk or two of good dry wood. When the wood is burning well, you can fill up the firebox. After everything has caught, close the ashpan door, but leave the air intake draft and oven dampers wide open. At this point, it's desirable to have a stovepipe thermometer so you can tell when your fire is burning hot and clean. Both Waterford and Vermont Castings (who don't make cooking stoves but make very good non-polluting heating stoves) say that a fire should be burning at 500 degrees before you choke it down, to minimize particulate emissions and creosote buildup. Cookstoves don't have catalytic converters so if you live in an area where pollution is an issue, it's important to be conscientious.

Now that you have your fire burning well, you can begin to regulate it. Here's where the airtight models really show their stuff. If you have an airtight model, you've got a load of wood in the firebox that will burn for hours. Once you get the oven temperature adjusted, you're ready to bake. Adjust the oven temperature by controlling the supply of air to the fire. If the temperature is climbing very rapidly, you'll want to start regulating the air supply about 100 degrees before you reach the desired temperature. Experience will tell you just how early and how much to adjust the air supply. It took a year for me to get really accurate with the Stanley, and only a couple of months to adjust to the Pioneer Maid. It can be helpful to use an oven thermometer to check and see if the built-in one is accurate. I had to adjust my baking temperature in the Stanley for good results, but the Pioneer Maid's built-in thermometer seems to be perfectly accurate.

Keeping warm all night

You're warm and well-fed, but the temperature is plummeting unseasonably, and you want to make sure the frost stays outside tonight! If you've got a Pioneer Maid, all you do is throw several of your big chunks on the fire, wait till the wood is burning well and heated through, then shut the spin-drafts almost all the way. You'll be toasty in the morning. If you've got a Stanley, well, it's a little more difficult. Wait till the fire has burned down to a good bed of coals. Then take about three large chunks of your best and hardest wood. (In the east, most any hardwood will do. Here in the northwest, tamarack or maple is best). Load them in, and let the fire catch and warm up the wood for just a few minutes. Then shut down the spindraft all but a quarter turn, and close both the oven and chimney dampers all the way. There is enough air passage around the end of the oven damper to keep the fire going. When the stove is new, this technique will produce an eight-hour burn, but as the stove ages, it gets harder and harder until you give in and replace and gaskets and the adjustment screw in the spin-draft.

Now we're cooking!

What can you cook or bake in your wood cookstove? Just about anything! The only thing I don't try to do is broil. The variable heat on the stovetop provides better temperature control than any gas or electric stove I ever used. The further you move the pot away from the area over the firebox, the slower it cooks. As far as the oven goes, the all-around heat provides for even baking and wonderfully crusty baked goods. Some ovens bake more evenly than others, with airtight rating the best in my experience. With the Pioneer Maid, the only reason I take my baked goods out and turn them is to check on how well they are getting done, and judge how much more time they need. I often put a stainless steel bowl of hot water in the bottom of the oven to modify the dry heat produced by the wood fire.

What is your cookstove made of?

The material your cookstove is made of is very important. Sheet steel will only do for an old-fashioned style stove which makes no pretensions to being airtight. This is because airtight stoves produce creosote, a very corrosive liquid. In a cookstove, the creosote will run down the chimney and pool in the area under the oven, where it will sit and do its nasty work until it eventually dries out. The folks at Pioneer Place discovered that if they tested stoves under worst-case conditions, with lots of green wood and choked-down fires, they could rust out a 12-gauge sheet metal stove in just over a year. They decided to make their Pioneer Maid stoves out of 304 stainless, guaranteed never to rust or corrode. Waterford makes their Stanleys with an all cast-iron fire path. Cast-iron is not quite as good as stainless, but far better than sheet steel. If you figure you're only going to buy one wood cookstove to last the rest of your life, then checking the quality of the materials is very important.

Where to buy them

Stanleys are available at many Waterford dealers around the country. For the dealer nearest you, write: Waterford Irish Stoves, Inc., River Mill Complex, 85 Mechanic St., Lebanon, NH 03766.

Pioneer Maid cookstoves are only available by mail order. For more information, write: Supertime Stoves Limited, Route 4, Aylmer, Ontario N5H 2R3, Canada.

Elmira cookstoves may be found at many dealers throughout the country. Δ

"Americans have the right and advantage of being armed—unlike the citizens of other countries whose governments are afraid to trust the people with arms."

James Madison